Do Different Polls Get the Same Results?

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BECAUSE OF THE IMPORTANT ROLE polls are assuming in our democracy, it is essential to know if the figures gathered and reported by one organization are approximately the same as the results another organization would obtain with the same question. Every four years polling organizations have a chance to test themselves against election results and to compare their performances. But aside from these well known comparisons, there has been little information available to show what the similarity is between results of different organizations in the course of their normal operations. This study was designed as a first step toward filling in the gap.

If a comparison of results is to be reliable, identical questions asked at approximately the same time must be used. For the past few years, the Princeton Office of Public Opinion Research has been accumulating such results. Most of the comparisons are between our own sampling operation and the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO), since we knew in advance what questions the AIPO was including. Other comparisons are between the *Fortune* Poll and AIPO or the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and a few questions used either by *Fortune* or NORC and repeated by the Office of Public Opinion Research (OPOR).

TABLE 1

Organizations compared	*Number of questions*	*Number of comparisons*
AIPO—OPOR	13	42
AIPO—*FORTUNE*	4	40
OPOR—*FORTUNE*	2	10
NORC—*FORTUNE*	1	4
OPOR—NORC	1	3

Each of the four polling organizations involved is completely independent of the others. Each has its own distinctive interviewing staff, its own representative sample. It is important to point out, however, that each of these organizations constructs its sample by the same basic

method of quota control. Hence the comparisons reported are comparisons of various polling organizations, not of various sampling methods. It would be particularly interesting to have comparisons of different methods, especially the quota control system and the area control system employed by various government agencies. It is to be hoped that such comparisons will soon be made.

The comparisons reported here are those obtained from the regular surveys of the different organizations. The size of the sample varies from one organization to another but is relatively constant within each organization. *Fortune* obtains about 5,000 interviews; AIPO, about 3,500 (around 1,750 on each of its two forms of the split ballot); NORC, around 2,500; OPOR, around 1,200. AIPO generally uses a "political" sample which cuts down representation in the South. *Fortune,* NORC, and OPOR use a regular "social" sample.

THE AVERAGE DIFFERENCE: 3.24

Altogether twenty-one questions, providing ninety-nine comparisons have been accumulated. The actual questions used and the results obtained are appended for reference. The average difference between the results is 3.24 percentage points.

These results can be subdivided in two ways: (1) those obtained during approximately the same ten-day interval and those where the interval is over ten days; (2) questions that are strictly of a political nature and those more general in scope. There is, as expected, more agreement on questions asked during the same ten-day interval, especially on straight political questions. And, in general, the more concrete political questions result in slightly more agreement than the non-political.

By and large these results indicate a highly creditable performance on the part of the polls, especially if we remember that the expected margin of error in such sampling operations is around 3 or 4 percent. Professor S. S. Wilks has suggested that it would be advantageous to polling organizations if a comparison of results were made at regular intervals and all data sent to an impartial statistical committee for review and analysis. The function of such a committee would not be that of a policeman. Rather the purpose would be an accumulation of data for an exchange of information and, when later comparisons are made of different methods of sampling, a study of the adequacies and inadequacies of different methods for different problems.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF SURVEY RESULTS

Type of question and time interval	*No. of comparisons*	*Average difference*
Total	99	3.24
Political	66	3.15
Same 10-day interval	25	2.81
11-70 days	41	3.36
Non-political	33	3.43
Same 10-day interval	21	3.33
11-70 days	12	3.60
Same 10-day interval	46	3.05
11-70 days	53	3.41

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF RESULTS[1]

Difference in percentage points	*Number of occurrences*
0	8
1	17
2	19
3	18
4	10
5	13
6	3
7	3
8	2
9	4
10	1
11	0
12	1

[1] All decimals reported by the *Fortune* Poll have been rounded off in the usual way.

THE COMPARISONS

The following is a detailed tabulation of the results when the same question was asked by two polls:[2]

Which party do you want to see win the Presidential election next year—the Democrats or the Republicans?

	AIPO (March 24, '43)	OPOR (March 30, '43)
Democrats	41	43
Republicans	30	29
Other	1	2
No opinion	22	23
Qualified answer	6	3
	100	100

Which of these four statements comes *closest* to expressing your own opinion of Mr. Roosevelt?

	FORTUNE (Nov., '40)	AIPO (Oct. 24, '40)	
		K Form	*T Form*
A. In times like these, it is absolutely essential to have a man like Roosevelt for President.	25.5	32	27
B. There may be some reasons against having Roosevelt for another four years, but on the whole it is the best thing to do.	27.8	19	22
C. While Roosevelt has done some good things, the country would be better off under Willkie for the next four years.	21.2	21	19
D. The re-election of Mr. Roosevelt for another four years would be a very bad thing for the country.	19.0	20	23
Don't know	6.5	8	9
	100.0	100	100

Which of these four statements comes *closest* to expressing your opinion of Wendell Willkie?

	FORTUNE (Nov., '40)	AIPO (Oct. 24, '40)	
		K Form	*T Form*
A. Willkie is just the man the country needs for President during the next four years.	11.1	14	16

[2] The dates indicated are the dates ballots were sent out except in the case of the *Fortune* Poll, where the dates indicate date of publication.

	FORTUNE (Nov., '40)	AIPO (Oct. 24, '40)	
		K Form	*T Form*
B. Even though Willkie hasn't as much political and international experience as he needs, he still would make a better President than Roosevelt.	26.8	28	27
C. Willkie is probably an honest and capable businessman but he hasn't the right experience to be President in times like these.	36.5	32	31
D. The election of a man like Mr. Willkie would be a very bad thing for the country.	13.8	16	17
Don't know	11.8	10	9
	100.0	100	100

Which party do you want to see win the presidential election next year—the Democrats or the Republicans?

	AIPO (March 10, '43)	OPOR (March 30, '43)
Democrats	61	62
Republicans	39	38
	100	100

If the war is STILL GOING ON and President Roosevelt runs for the Democrats against Governor Dewey for the Republicans, how do you think you will vote?

	AIPO (March 29, '44)	OPOR (March 1, '44)
Roosevelt	51	51
Dewey	41	32
No opinion	8	17
	100	100

If the war is OVER and Roosevelt runs for the Democrats against Dewey, how do you think you will vote?

	AIPO (March 29, '44)	OPOR (March 1, '44)
Roosevelt	35	30
Dewey	55	51
No opinion	10	19
	100	100

If the war is over and Roosevelt runs for a fourth term next year, do you think you will vote for him or against him?

	AIPO (Feb. 23, '43)	OPOR (March 30, '43)
For	37	40
Against	50	49
No opinion	13	11
	100	100

Which of the following statements comes *closest* to expressing your own opinion of Mr. Roosevelt?

	FORTUNE (Oct., '40)	AIPO (Oct. 19, '40)	
		K Form	*T Form*
A. In times like these, it is absolutely essential to have a man like Roosevelt for President.	26.7	29	27
B. There may be some reasons against having Roosevelt for another four years, but on the whole it is the best thing to do.	26.5	22	23
C. While Roosevelt has done some good things, the country would be better off under Willkie for the next four years.	22.3	19	19
D. The re-election of Mr. Roosevelt for another four years would be a very bad thing for the country.	16.4	21	22
Don't know	8.1	9	9
	100.0	100	100

Which of these four statements comes *closest* to expressing your opinion of Wendell Willkie?

	FORTUNE (Oct., '40)	AIPO (Oct. 19, '40)	
		K Form	*T Form*
A. Willkie is just the man the country needs for President during the next four years.	11.5	16	14
B. Even though Willkie hasn't as much political and international experience as he needs, he still would make a better President than Roosevelt.	24.1	25	26
C. Willkie is probably an honest and capable businessman but he hasn't the right experience to be President in times like these.	36.1	33	34
D. The election of a man like Mr. Willkie would be a very bad thing for the country.	9.4	15	14
Don't know	18.9	11	12
	100.0	100	100

With which of these statements do you come closest to agreeing?

	FORTUNE (Sept. 7, '44)	OPOR (Oct. 5, '44)
A. Roosevelt has done an excellent job and it's very important that he should be President during the next four years.	26.3	25.5
B. While he has made mistakes and he's been in office a long time, it is still better to elect Roosevelt President again for the next four years.	28.3	26.0
C. Although Roosevelt has done some good things, he has been President long enough and the country would be better off to elect Dewey for the next four years.	27.3	28.7
D. It would be a very bad thing for this country to re-elect Roosevelt for another four years.	13.6	12.5
Don't know	4.5	7.3
	100.0	100.0

	(Sept. 15, '44)	(Oct. 5, '44)
A. Dewey has an excellent record and it would be the best thing for the country to elect him President for the next four years.	25.1	24.9
B. While Dewey may not be ideal for the job, it certainly would be better to have him than Roosevelt for the next four years.	19.3	16.7
C. Although Dewey may have some very good qualities, he still could not do the job as well as Roosevelt during the next four years.	34.3	29.1
D. It would be a very bad thing for this country to elect Dewey as President for the next four years.	15.0	19.1
Don't know	6.3	10.2
	100.0	100.0

Taking everything into consideration, which side do you think will win the war?

	FORTUNE (Dec., '41)	NORC (Nov., '41)
Allies	72.5	69.0
Axis	7.0	4.2
Neither	4.3	3.5
Don't know	16.2	23.3
	100.0	100.0

Which country is the greatest military threat to the United States—Germany or Japan?

	AIPO (March 24, '43)	OPOR (March 16, '43)
Germany	25	29
Japan	53	53
Both	18	14
No opinion	4	4
	100	100

In general, do you think the government has gone too far or not far enough in asking people to make sacrifices for the war?

	AIPO (April 25, '44)	OPOR (April 20, '44)
Too far	12	8
About right	42	37
Not far enough	37	49
No opinion	9	6
	100	100

Do you think Russia can be trusted to cooperate with us when the war is over?

	AIPO (Jan. 18, '44)	OPOR (Jan. 24, '44)
Yes	40	42
No	36	33
No opinion	24	25
	100	100

Do you think Russia can be trusted to cooperate with us when the war is over?

	AIPO (April 6, '43)	OPOR (March 30, '43)
Yes	45	42
No	34	39
No opinion	21	19
	100	100

Which of these two things do you think the United States should try to do when the war is over: Stay out of world affairs as much as we can, or take an active part in world affairs?

	AIPO (April 25, '44)	OPOR (April 5, '44)
Stay out	18	28
Take active part	74	66
No opinion	8	6
	100	100

If our military leaders believe it will be necessary to bomb historic religious buildings and shrines in Europe, would you approve or disapprove of their decision?

	AIPO (March 29, '44)	OPOR (March 1, '44)
Approve	77	79
Disapprove	17	17
No opinion	6	4
	100	100

Do you think the United States is doing all it possibly can to win the war?

	NORC (April 8, '44)	OPOR (April 20, '44)
Yes	71	74
No	21	23
Don't know	8	3
	100	100

After this war is over, do you think every young man should be required to serve one year in the Army or Navy?

	AIPO (Dec. '42)	OPOR (April 20, '44)
Yes	67.4	70
No	26.6	22
No opinion	6.0	8
	100.0	100